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ABSTRACT

In Canada, acclamation occurs when there are not enough candidates nominated for particular seats to force election campaigns. The candidates are then automatically declared elected, and the election process is aborted. This paper identifies cohorts of newly elected trustees and tracks them through a series of elections to determine the acclamation patterns over time of individual trustees. Of a cohort of 196 Ontario trustees who were tracked through 3 elections, 38 (19.4 percent) were acclaimed in their first election and 28 (14.3 percent) received two or three consecutive acclamations. One hundred trustees (51 percent) received no acclamations. Of a cohort of 237 Alberta trustees who were also tracked through 3 elections, 53 (22.4 percent) were acclaimed in their first election and 41 (17.3 percent) received 2 or 3 consecutive acclamations. One hundred and thirty-three trustees (55.3 percent) received no acclamations. In both cohorts, trustees from noncity areas were more likely to be acclaimed in their first election and were more likely to receive consecutive acclamations than were trustees from cities. The more terms trustees served, the more likely they were to have one or more acclamations. Among trustees who served more than one term, acclamations were more likely to occur in the second or third election than in the first. The findings help to alleviate, though not eliminate, concerns that acclamations subvert the legitimacy of the political process. Contains three tables and eight references. (LMI)

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ELECTION BY ACCLAMATION AMONG TWO COHORTS OF CANADIAN PUBLIC SCHOOL TRUSTEES

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ELECTION BY ACCLAMATION AMONG TWO COHORTS OF CANADIAN PUBLIC SCHOOL TRUSTEES

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Previous, cross- sectional studies have shown that on average across the country, about half of Canadian school board trustees are acclaimed to office, and that acclamations are much more likely to occur in rural areas than in urban areas. While acclamations do result in the appointment of leaders to office, they subvert, either in whole or in part, all of the other valuable functions served by the complete election process. Hence, acclamations may harm the veneer of political legitimacy that is needed to maintain public support for a compulsory, tax- supported and virtually universal school system in a democratic society. This study is important because it is the first to identify cohorts of newly elected trustees and to track them through a series of elections to determine the acclamation patterns, over time, of individual trustees. Of a cohort of 196 Ontario trustees who were tracked through three elections, 38 (19.4%) were acclaimed in their first election and 28 (14.3%) received two or three consecutive acclamations. One hundred trustees (51.0%) received no acclamations at all. Of a cohort of 237 Alberta trustees who were also tracked through three elections, 53 (22.4%) were acclaimed in their first election and 41 (17.3%) received two or three consecutive acclamations. One hundred and thirty- one trustees (55.3%) received no acclamations. In both cohorts, trustees from non- city areas were more likely to be acclaimed in their first election and were more likely to receive consecutive acclamations than were trustees from cities. The more terms trustees served, the more likely they were to have one or more acclamations. Among trustees who served more than one term, acclamations were more likely to occur in the second or third election than in the first. The findings of this study help to alleviate, though not eliminate concerns raised by the previous studies.

ELECTION BY ACCLAMATION AMONG TWO COHORTS OF CANADIAN PUBLIC SCHOOL TRUSTEES

Introduction

Several previous studies, both reported and unreported, have raised serious concerns about the proportion of Canadian school trustees who are acclaimed to office. The studies have shown that on average across the country, about half of our trustees are acclaimed, and that acclamations are much more likely to occur in rural areas than in urban areas.

The study reported in this article is significant for two reasons. First, the previous studies were all cross-sectional investigations of particular elections. The study reported here is the first to identify cohorts of trustees and to track them through a series of elections in order to determine the acclamation patterns, over time, of individual trustees. Second, the findings of the study help to alleviate, though not eliminate, concerns raised by the previous studies.

Background

The study of acclamations in school trustee elections is important because it addresses significant questions about the effectiveness of our election process, and, consequently, the political legitimacy of our school board system. The selection of leaders, though important, is only one of several functions served by the election process. Elections also provide an important forum for the expression of public opinion, and permit an exchange of influence between the leaders and those who are led. They provide the main mechanism by which leaders can be held accountable for their performance while in office, and thus they lend authority and legitimacy to the corporate acts of the elected body. Finally, they confirm the worth and dignity of the individual citizen- voter. (Eulau and Gibbons, 1974)

Acclamations occur when there are not enough candidates nominated for particular seats (or sets of seats) to force election campaigns and balloting. Instead, the candidates are automatically declared elected at the close of nominations, and the rest of the election process is aborted. Thus, while acclamations do result in the appointment of leaders to office, they subvert, either in whole or in part, all of the other valuable functions served by the complete election process. At best, therefore, acclamations may be viewed as preventing our elections, and consequently our representative school boards, from functioning as effectively as they otherwise might. At worst, acclamations may do positive harm to the veneer of political legitimacy that is needed to maintain

public support for a compulsory, tax- supported and virtually universal school system in a democratic society.

Previous Research

Frequency of Acclamations

Two national studies have shown that on average across the country, approximately half of Canadian school trustees are acclaimed to office.

A survey conducted during 1986, using data for the most recent election year for which data were then available in each province, revealed that of a sample of 5,373 trustee positions, 2,591 (48.2%) had been filled by acclamation. Another 126 positions (2.3%) had been left vacant because there were no candidates at all. In total, 2,717 positions (50.6%) had either been filled by acclamation or left vacant by the election process. (Whitehead, 1986) The total per centage of trustee positions either filled by acclamation or left vacant ranged from a low of 27.3 per cent in British Columbia to a high of 80.1 percent in Quebec. In six out of ten provinces the figure was 50 per cent or higher.

A previously unreported replication survey was conducted five years later during 1991, with similar results. Out of a sample of 7,420 trustee positions nation wide, 3,942 (53.1%) had been filled by acclamation, and 227 (3.1%) positions had been left vacant. The total of 4,169 positions filled by acclamation or left vacant was 56.2 per cent of the sample. Whether the increase of 5.6 per cent over the previous study is indicitive of a trend or is merely part of a normal fluctuation remains to be determined.

In the 1991 study, the total per centage of trustee positions either filled by acclamation or left vacant ranged from a low of 24.7 per cent in British Columbia to a high of 80.5 per cent in Prince Edward Island. Again, in six out of ten provinces the figure was 50 per cent or higher.

Relationship Between Acclamation Rates and Urbanization

Detailed studies of eight trustee elections in three provinces have consistently shown a strong, inverse relationship between the per centage of trustees acclaimed to office and the degree of urbanization of the areas represented by the trustees. In other words, rural areas have a higher proportion of acclamations than urban areas, though even the most urbanized metropolitan areas have some acclamations.

Ontario. In Ontario, previously reported studies of the 1982, 1985 and 1988 trustee elections each used different methods of measuring urbanization. (Whitehead, 1985, 1987, 1990) The results of the study of the 1988 elections are typical of the results of

the three studies. The sample included 867 public school board trustees of whom 326 represented city areas, and of whom 541 represented non- city areas. The sample also included 476 separate school board trustees of whom 231 represented city areas, and of whom 245 represented non- city areas. Among public school board trustees the acclamation rate was 9.8 per cent in cities, but rose to 51.4% in non- city areas. Among separate school board trustees, the acclamation rate was 18.6 per cent in cities, but rose to 54.7 per cent in non- city areas. (Whitehead, 1990)

Alberta. Previously unreported studies of the 1980, 1983, 1986 and 1989 trustee elections in Alberta all compared acclamation rates among city and non- city trustees, and all produced results which were consistent with those of the Ontario studies.

The study of the 1980 elections was based on an analysis of the election results prepared by the Alberta Department of Education for internal use. The results showed that among 60 trustees of city school boards (i.e., boards serving cities exclusively) there were no acclamations. (The data did not distinguish between public and separate school boards in the cities.) However, among the 660 non-city public school board trustees (including a small number of protestant separate school board trustees), 364 (55.2%) were acclaimed. Of the 255 non-city separate school board trustees, 103 (40.4%) were acclaimed.

The studies of the 1983, 1986, and 1989 elections were done using raw data provided by the Alberta Department of Education. The results of these three studies are summarized in Table 1, shown on the following page.

British Columbia. In British Columbia, a study conducted by the assistant director of the Field Services Division of the Ministry of Education examined the relationship between acclamations and urbanization in the 1986 school board elections. The study categorized individual trustees as either "rural" or "non- rural," though the criteria used for making these categorizations were not stated. The study found that, "within the rural trustee ranks, 53% achieve office by acclamation, whereas in the non-rural ranks only 17% gain office by acclamation." (Good, 1987) These findings are consistent with those of the Ontario and Alberta studies.

Table 1

NUMBER AND PER CENT OF ALBERTA SCHOOL TRUSTEES ACCLAIMED IN THE 1983, 1986 AND 1989 ELECTIONS

	1983	1986	1989
PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARD TRUSTEES			
Total number of trustees	807	768	802
Number acclaimed	307	322	396
Per cent acclaimed	38.0%	41.9%	49.4%
a. City Trustees			
Number of trustees	62	67	84
Number acclaimed	0	0	15
Per cent acclaimed	0.0%	0.0%	17.9%
b. Non- city trustees			
Number of trustees	745	701	718
Number acclaimed	307	322	381
Per cent acclaimed	41.2%	45.9%	53.1%
SEPARATE SCHOOL BOARD TRUSTEES			
Total number of trustees	297	344	360
Number acclaimed	162	175	246
Per cent acclaimed	54.5%	50.9%	68.3%
a. City Trustees			
Number of trustees	61	73	83
Number acclaimed	12	15	40
Per cent acclaimed	19.7%	20.5%	48.2%
b. Non- city trustees			
Number of trustees	236	271	277
Number acclaimed	150	160	206
Per cent acclaimed	63.6%	59.0%	74.4%

Research Questions and Rationale

Previous research included only cross- sectional studies of particular elections. The approach taken in this study was to identify newly elected trustees and to track them individually through two additional elections to determine each trustee's pattern of acclamations and contested elections over a total of three consecutive elections. Specifically, the main purposes of the study were: (1) to determine how many of the trustees were acclaimed the first time they ran for office, and (2) to determine how many trustees were acclaimed in two or more consecutive elections.

Question 1. Analysis of the results of one Ontario election has suggested that the incidence of electoral defeat among school trustees is low. (Whitehead, 1989) One reason for this may be that incumbents get more media attention over time than do non-incumbents. Since persons challenging incumbent trustees in elections most often do so as individuals rather than as representatives of well- organized and well- funded political groups, incumbent trustees, with their better name recognition among the public and their known track records, come into election campaigns with more powerfull positions. In most cases, therefore, once in office trustees are difficult to dislodge and they can often stay on as long as they wish.

Following this line of reasoning, it becomes important for the sake of political legitimacy that trustees initially gain office through contested elections, rather than through acclamations. Given the staying power of incumbents, in many cases it may be only a trustee's first election that has any real significance. Therefore, it seemed important in this study to find out how many of the trustees were acclaimed in their first elections.

Question 2. With regard to the question of trustees being acclaimed in two or more consecutive elections, it seems likely that in the natural course of events a certain number of acclamations will occur by chance. This is especially so because in Canada most localities do not have candidate generating organizations like the political parties that generate candidates for federal and provincial elections. It also seems likely that a small number of acclamations will not do much harm to the political legitimacy of the school board or the school system, unless the same trustees are being acclaimed repeatedly. However, when citizens are deprived of an important opportunity to influence and hold accountable their elected officers in several consecutive elections, then it may be that the legitimacy of the system will begin to be questioned, especially if the phenomenon is wide-spread.

Data Sources and Sample Selection

The study was retrospective, and used the same data bases that had been gathered during the studies of the 1982, 1985 and 1988 Ontario elections, and the 1983, 1986 and 1989 Alberta elections as summarized earlier in this article.

The first cohort was formed by reviewing the data which had been gathered for the study of the 1982 Ontario elections and by identifying every public school board trustee included in the data who had gained office for the first time in 1982. Those who had previously served as trustees but who had been off the board for a term or more were included as new trustees, but the number of such persons was quite small. A small number of trustees who had been appointed mid- way through the previous term to complete the term for trustees who had vacated their seats, were also included. The total number of new trustees identified was 226. However, those for whom complete data were not available were later dropped, leaving a cohort of 196 trustees.

The second cohort was formed in a similar manner by reviewing the 1983 Alberta elections data and by identifying every public school board trustee included in the data who gained office for the first time in 1983. In this case, the definition of public school board trustee included trustees of protestant separate school boards. The total number of new trustees identified was 261. However, those for whom complete data were not available were later dropped, leaving a cohort of 237 trustees.

Findings

The data for the Ontario cohort are presented in Table 2 on the following page, for the Alberta cohort in Table 3 on page 8. The findings for the two cohorts are remarkably similar, especially in relation to the two main research questions.

Acclamations During First Election

The Ontario data show that out of the cohort of 196 trustees, only 38 (19.4%) were acclaimed in their first election, while 158 (80.6%) had contested elections their first time. All of the trustees acclaimed in their first election were from non- city areas. No city trustees received acclamations until the second and/or third elections. Of the 38 trustees who were acclaimed in their first election, 23 (60.5%) served only one term.

The Alberta data show that out of the cohort of 237 trustees, only 53 (22.4%) were acclaimed in their first election, while 184 (77.6%) had contested elections their first time. These per centages are almost identical to those for the Ontario

Table 2

ACCLAMATION PATTERNS AMONG A COHORT OF ONTARIO SCHOOL BOARD TRUSTEES IN THE 1982, 1985 AND 1988 ELECTIONS

A = Acclamation
C = Contested election

Example: A-C-A means an acclamation in the 1982 election, a contested election in 1985, and an acclamation in 1988. The numbers below each pattern indicate the number of city trustees, non- city trustees, and total trustees whose election histories match the pattern.

TRUSTEES WHO SERVED ONE TERM

	A	C	ROW TOTAL
City	0	15	15
Non- city	23	25	48
Total	23	40	63

TRUSTEES WHO SERVED TWO TERMS

	A-A	A-C	C-A	C-C	ROW TOTAL
City	0	0	0	13	13
Non- city	5	2	15	14	36
Total	5	2	15	27	49

TRUSTEES SERVING THEIR THIRD TERM AT THE TIME OF THE STUDY

	A-A-A	A-A-C	A-C-A	C-A-A
City	0	0	0	2
Non- city	2	3	2	16
Total	2	3	2	18

	A-C-C	C-A-C	C-C-A	C-C-C	ROW TOTAL
City	0	4	3	19	28
Non- city	1	7	11	14	56
Total	1	11	14	33	84

Table 3

ACCLAMATION PATTERNS AMONG A COHORT OF ALBERTA SCHOOL BOARD TRUSTEES IN THE 1983, 1986 AND 1989 ELECTIONS

A = Acclamation
C = Contested election

Example: A-C-A means an acclamation in the 1983 election, a contested election in 1986, and an acclamation in 1989. The numbers below each pattern indicate the number of city trustees, non- city trustees, and total trustees whose election histories match the pattern.

TRUSTEES WHO SERVED ONE TERM

	A	**C**	**ROW TOTAL**
City	0	13	13
Non- city	20	71	91
Total	20	84	104

TRUSTEES WHO SERVED TWO TERMS

	A-A	**A-C**	**C-A**	**C-C**	**ROW TOTAL**
City	0	0	0	7	7
Non- city	11	1	14	20	46
Total	11	1	14	27	53

TRUSTEES SERVING THEIR THIRD TERM AT THE TIME OF THE STUDY

	A-A-A	**A-A-C**	**A-C-A**	**C-A-A**
City	0	0	0	0
Non- city	9	5	7	16
Total	9	5	7	16

	A-C-C	**C-A-C**	**C-C-A**	**C-C-C**	**ROW TOTAL**
City	0	0	2	12	14
Non- city	0	10	11	8	66
Total	0	10	13	20	80

cohort. As in Ontario, all of the trustees acclaimed in their first election were from non- city areas. No city trustees received acclamations until the third election. Of the 53 trustees who were acclaimed in their first election, 20 (37.7%) served only one term.

Consecutive Acclamations

The Ontario data show that out of the cohort of 196 trustees, only 28 (14.3%) received two or three consecutive acclamations. For those 28 trustees, the dominant pattern was one contested election followed by two acclamations (18 trustees). In rank order, the next most common pattern was two acclamations (five trustees), followed by two acclamations and one contested election (three trustees), follwed by three acclamations (two trustees). All but two of the trustees who received consecutive acclamations were from non- city areas.

The Alberta data show that out of the cohort of 237 trustees, only 41 (17.3%) received two or three consecutive acclamations, a per centage almost identical to that for the Ontario cohort. For those 41 trustees, the dominant pattern was one contested election followed by two acclamations (16 trustees), the same as in Ontario. In rank order, the next most common pattern was two acclamations (11 trustees), followed by three acclamations (nine trustees), followed by two acclamations and one contested election (five trustees). This rank ordering of patterns was very similar, though not identical to the Ontario rank ordering. All of the trustees who received consecutive acclamations were from non- city areas.

Other Findings

It is interesting to note that among the 196 Ontario trustees, 100 (51.0%) received no acclamations. Among the 237 Alberta trustees, 131 (55.3%) received no acclamations.

The more terms trustees had served, the more likely they were to have had one or more acclamations. The data for the Ontario cohort show that among the 63 trustees who served only one term, 23 (36.5%) were acclaimed. Among the 49 trustees who served two terms, 22 (44.9%) were acclaimed at least once. Among the 84 trustees who were serving their third term at the time of the study, 51 (60.7%) were acclaimed at least once. Similarly, the data for the Alberta cohort show that among the 104 trustees who served one term, 20 (19.2%) were acclaimed. Among the 53 trustees who served two terms, 26 (49.1%) were acclaimed at least once. Among the 80 trustees who were in their third term at the time of the study, 60 (75.0%) were acclaimed at least once.

Among trustees who served more than one term, acclamations were more likely to occur in the second or third election than in the first. The data for the Ontario cohort show that among the 49 trustees who served two terms, only seven (14.3%) were acclaimed in

the first election, while 20 (40.8%) were acclaimed in the second election. Among the 84 trustees who were in their third term at the time of the study, only 8 (9.5%) were acclaimed in the first election, while 34 (40.5%) were acclaimed in the second election and 36 (42.8%) were acclaimed in the third election. The data for the Alberta cohort show that among the 53 trustees who served two terms, 12 (22.6%) were acclaimed in the first election, while 25 (47.2%) were acclaimed in the second election. Among the 80 trustees who were in their third term at the time of the study, 21 (26.3%) were acclaimed in the first election, while 40 (50.0%) were acclaimed in the second election and 45 (56.3%) were acclaimed in the third election.

Conclusions and Discussion

If acclamation to office during a trustee's first election, or acclamation in two or more consecutive elections are causes for concern about the political legitimacy of our public school system, then the findings of this study should help to alleviate, though not eliminate, that concern. Of the trustees included in this study, approximately one- fifth were acclaimed in their first election. The vast majority, more than three- quarters, were subjected to contested elections in their first term. Likewise, less than one- fifth were acclaimed in two or more consecutive elections. The vast majority, more than four-fifths, had no consecutive acclamations and just over half had no acclamations at all during the three elections investigated in this study.

One striking thing about the results of this study, and of the previous studies, is the degree to which acclamations are a rural or "non- city" phenemenon. One possible explanation may derive from political efficacy theory and trust theory. As combined by Robinson and Wood (1988, p.38), this approach holds that people who feel they can be influential and make a difference in the political outcome, and who trust the ability of government to achieve its purposes, have a greater tendency to become involved in the political process than those who do not have such feelings. Thus, if non- city people sit on the same school boards with, but are out numbered by, city people, as is often the case in Ontario, they may consider that they cannot make a difference in the political outcome, since city interests may differ from non- city interests, and city trustees may have the ability to "out- vote" non- city trustees. However, the situation is quite different in Alberta where the cities tend to have their own boards, and there is much less mixing of city and non- city trustees on the same boards. Despite this important difference, this study's findings for Alberta are almost identical to those for Ontario, suggesting that political efficacy and trust theory may not be a big factor in explaining acclamations among non- city school trustees.

But there are other possible explanations. One may be simply that it is more inconvenient for non- city people to act as

trustees than it is for city people. For example, board offices tend to be located in an urban center, and rural trustees may have to drive long distances (up to an hour or more one way in some Ontario communities) to get to board and committee meetings. Or it may be that in small, closely- knit rural communities it is more difficult to run against a relative or a neighbour than it is for a city dweller to run against a complete stranger. In rural communities based around a pulp mill or a mine, rotating shift work may preclude a large proportion of the already small population from regular attendance at board and committee meetings, and hence from seeking election as well.

It may also be a simple matter of numbers. Every community has a number of "jobs" to be filled by volunteers. These include not only the high profile positions of school trustee, municipal councillor, member of the library, hospital or cemetary board and the like, but also positions with service clubs, churches, amateur athletic groups, youth groups and so on. It may be that in rural areas there are, proportionally, simply fewer people to go around among all the various positions that need to be filled to keep a community going. Perhaps in this case efficacy theory would be usefull if it were modified slightly to the effect that given a range of posible options, people will chose the activity they believe will be most efficacious, or likely to make the most positive difference in the community.

Finally, it may be that our electoral system actually operates differently in rural areas than it does in urban areas. Perhaps, for example, rural communities who are happy with their trustees' work make that decision informally prior to the formal election process and see no need to run an opposing candidate. Members of rural communities may be able to discuss issues and influence their trustees in a more direct and continuous way than is possible for most citizens in large urban areas, so that the mutual influence aspect of elections becomes less important than it is in the city. Similarly, it may be that rural communities who are unhappy with their trustees may be able to indicate their displeasure in such a way that the trustees "get the message" well before the election and retire gracefully at the end of the term. If it indeed were the case that the electoral system operates differently in rural areas, then it might also be the case that acclamations are not necessarily undesireable, or that they are less undesireable in rural areas than in urban areas.

Further work needs to be done not only to confirm the results of this study in other settings, but to begin to examine the reasons for acclamations in specific cases, both in urban and rural areas.

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